

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20515

March 31, 2021

Secretary Tom Vilsack  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write to submit public comment on the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. Like the rest of the country, New York City has experienced dire food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lines at our food pantries are the longest we have seen in our lifetimes, and many of those lining up are relying on food assistance for the first time. When the program has worked, the Farmers to Families Food Box Program has provided tremendous relief to our constituents. However, the program's logistical and communications problems have caused inconsistent deliveries, excluded certain populations from benefiting, and created an enormous administrative burden for non-profits. We strongly support additional rounds of this program, provided that the concerns our food banks and non-profits have experienced are addressed.

First, between each round of this program, there have been unclear rule changes, vendor changes, and a lack of communication with pantries and non-profits. These issues have prevented our hungry constituents from accessing food. On multiple occasions, our pantries learned on a Friday that the food their community was reliant on would not be showing up on the following Monday. USDA must ensure transparent communication with all participants of this program well in advance of any rule changes.

Second, after the first round, USDA only accepted contracts from vendors that could provide combination boxes with meat, dairy, and produce. As a result, kosher and vegetarian food banks, both of which often serve our halal observant constituents, could no longer participate in this program. Similarly, producers without onsite refrigeration could not provide produce-only boxes. In future rounds, we urge USDA to accept contracts for both combination boxes and boxes that provide only meat, dairy, or produce.

Third, during certain rounds, vendors with extra supply were barred from sending boxes to boroughs whose vendors came up short. For example, a vendor who was restricted to supplying to Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island told us they had enough supply for Queens and the Bronx, but weren't permitted to extend their radius. We urge USDA to ensure that vendors have the flexibility to provide excess food supply to those in need, beyond their geographical jurisdiction.

As USDA reevaluates COVID food assistance programs, we urge you to take all possible steps to ensure that these programs are equitable and accessible for all those in need.

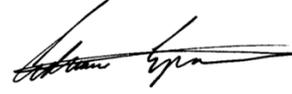
Sincerely,



Grace Meng  
Member of Congress



Nydia M. Velázquez  
Member of Congress



Adriano Espaillat  
Member of Congress